

Annual Canadian French UPF conference held in Catholic Church in Montreal

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Living Together, without religion? Impossible! was the response given to the question posed at the annual French UPF conference held in the Laurentien Meeting Room of the Saint Sixte Catholic Church in Montreal on November 12, 2016.

Eight organizations concerned with improving the quality of Montreal Life contributed to the effort – namely; Bel Agir (Act Well), Center for Prevention of Radicalization leading to Violence, A Catholic Student Center founded by Father Benoit Lacroix, Religions for Peace, Council of Religious Leaders of Montreal North, CARP, Collective for Unity of Iles des Soeurs (Nun’s Island) and Universal Peace Federation.

The entire conference was moderated by Catholic educator, Mrs. Danielle De Lorimier, who has years of experience educating teachers of religion and morality.

After introductory comments by UPF Canada Secretary-General Franco Famularo, Mayor Alan DeSousa of the St. Laurent Borough of Montreal, emphasized his pride in being a part of the efforts of an organization based in his borough such as UPF and all the participating organizations in helping to break down barriers and tensions within our communities. St. Laurent is one of the most ethnically diverse communities in Canada with the largest Arab population.

The first panel, entitled “Living together and the role of the media – between sensationalism and information” addressed the thorny issue of how the media impacts society’s view of faith based organizations. Speakers included a journalist, a blogger, a novelist and a radio talk show host.

Anne-Marie Sicotte, a well known novelist and historian in Quebec explained that the various media enterprises require financial viability and therefore have a tendency toward sensationalism when they cover religious issues.

Dalida Awada, blogger and founder of “Words of Women” who writes regularly on women’s rights, racism and Islamophobia for the magazine Voir, expressed that constructive dialogue is made difficult because too often Islam is badly represented in the mainstream media.

Lamine Foura, a Montreal radio talk show host, spoke of how there is a general perception that the media is telling the truth, however, none hold the absolute truth. Foura saw a partial solution in encouraging higher education and the development of a critical mind to better decipher media statements.

Jean-Claude Leclerc, a well-known journalist who currently teaches about the media at the University of Montreal drew on his long experience of writing about Religion and Ethics for the Montreal daily Le Devoir and expressed how he personally traces his origins to a primarily homogeneous and Catholic Francophone town in Quebec and how he discovered upon arriving in Montreal as a student that cultural and religious plurality is a treasure. Media has an important role in helping to overcome prejudices that are present in all cultures.



The 2nd panel focused on the “Contribution of religious pluralism toward the promotion of social peace”.

Evangelical pastor Mésene Itilus who also serves as president of the Council of Religious Leaders of Montreal North suggested that religion is a universal phenomenon and faith based groups in Canada are essential in assisting newcomers and helping them to integrate with Canadian society. When religious freedom is promoted, human rights are respected.

Former professor at the University of Quebec, Mr. Daniel Picot who currently serves with Religions for Peace opined that religious groups need recognition for the contribution they bring to society. However, faith based organizations also need to be self-critical. It is important to emphasize that which unites us rather than that which divides us.

Meriem Rebbani-Gosselin, a doctoral candidate at the University of Montreal and head researcher at the Center for the Prevention of Radicalization leading to violence, shared that the radicalization that we observe today tells us that we need to involve community members in the dialogue. Ignorance of the religious fact in certain institutions leads to individuals and entire groups being ignored.



The third panel explored the ”Management of pluralism in the political realm”

Isabelle Laurin one of the founding members and current Secretary of the Council of Religious Leaders of Montreal North and representative at Montreal North’s Peace and Security committee, expressed that although many efforts have been made to organize projects that bring the various communities together, faith based groups increasingly have the sentiment that their needs are being ignored by municipal

authorities. Efforts by municipalities to consider the views of faith based organizations have slowly increased. There is still much to do.

Solange Lefevre, Head of the Religion and Cultural Diversity department at the University of Montreal and a highly sought after advisor by governments in both Canada and abroad, shared that too often indirect support by cities and towns in terms of property tax exemption is seen as problematic. Some jurisdictions are better equipped to be generous than others and therefore better mutual understanding is necessary

Former Superior Court Judge, Ms. Anne-Marie Trahan, explained that secularism in Canada means that one should not show preference to one religion over another. The Canadian model has been effective since most ethnic and cultural communities have successfully integrated in their respective communities. In some countries where one religion is favoured over another, efforts to integrate new arrivals have been more complicated.

The fourth and final panel entitled “Collective for Unity” made everyone aware of the ongoing efforts for representatives of new and ancient traditions on how to practically collaborate on the municipal level. In this case study, Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Ile des Soeurs zone of Verdun, (a Montreal borough) initially joined forces to assist recent refugee families from Syria. Mourad Bendjennet, an architect by profession and volunteer, further explained how the faith based groups realized that such joint efforts by the different religious groups are most effective in preventing radicalization.

Sélina Driss, a businesswoman and also part of the collective and a volunteer in the Tunisian community explained that the importance of a humanitarian project unites rather than divides the communities. Theological discussions are of not front and center for the volunteers. Delegations from Europe have visited the project to find new ideas on how to alleviate tensions in their own European milieu.

The conference included lively question and answer sessions after each panel and a healthy dialogue among the over fifty participants throughout the day.

